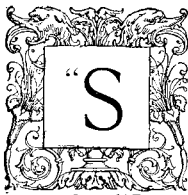


Home Influence

BY ALICE DUER MILLER



STRANGE that Lola has never married," said her brother as she left the room.

His father's eyes turned to him quickly. "Strange?" he answered. "I don't see anything strange about it. What man could do as much for her as I do?"

The air of the dining-room was beginning to fill with the smoke from two long, dark cigars, and to lose the perfume of the thick-petaled, white flowers in the center of the table, and of the pyramids of fruit in silver dishes at the ends.

George Varens glanced round the room. It had been elaborately paneled in the year 1880, and hung with dark, blurred pictures in heavy, gold frames. His father had bought the house soon after his marriage and had it done over according to his own ideas. He had never seen any reason for altering anything since. Neither his children, nor his wife during her lifetime, would have thought of suggesting such a thing.

The dining-room had been the scene of many conflicts between the father and son—conflicts from which George liked to tell himself that he had emerged at last triumphant, independent, his own master. If he came back, as he occasionally did, it was as an equal, or at least as the chief of a friendly tribe, ready to offer counsel or alliance. There were no more conflicts. "No," George used to say, "he knows that I am almost forty years old and the head of an independent business." He never admitted that most of this business had come to him either directly through his father, or indirectly through those who wished to please his father.

A great many people wished to please Oliver Varens, and George himself was among the number. Indeed, his remark about Lola was intended as a compliment, and designed to please. Finding,

however, that it had failed, he did not retreat with undignified haste. Both his hands were engaged in plaiting a little paper wrapper that had held a chocolate, and he did not trouble to take his cigar from his mouth as he answered, "Oh, well, most people like to have some sort of life of their own."

"Lola has a life of her own," the elder man answered, almost roughly. "She is at the head of my house. I never go on a trip without taking her with me; every wish she has I gratify. She is in my confidence as many people, even you, George, would give a good deal to be; and, I can tell you, I have had some excellent suggestions from Lola. Marry! Not she. Why should she?"

It was plain from the tone of this question that Varens wanted an answer; and equally plain from the expression of George's face that he did not mean to give one. He sat smoking and looking aloof. He was disgusted to find that he was still rendered acutely uncomfortable by that note of antagonism in his father's voice. His first impulse was to say something conciliatory, but remembering his independent position he contrived to refrain.

In the pause the butler and two footmen came in with coffee and liqueurs—magnificent blond young Englishmen, they bent over the little, pale man at the head of the table. Like George, they also were afraid of him.

A casual observer might have found Oliver Varens insignificant in appearance; he was sixty-two and looked older; he was pale, with sparse, dark hair and a drooping mustache; but all the vigor of his mind and will had gone into a pair of black eyes, intense, but without sparkle; they never varied, never lightened when he smiled, never darkened when he scowled. They were like two little black openings into what many people considered his little black heart.

George took advantage of the interruption made by the entrance of the servants to change the subject.

"Let me say a word about this other matter, father," he said, as soon as they were again alone; and he was now very much the chief of a friendly tribe: "I feel in a position to state—I feel positive that these fellows have evidence that your transactions in the stock took place before the directors' meeting. They even hint at the existence of a letter. But I said to them, 'Gentlemen, if you knew my father as well as I do, you would know that, even were the facts as you assert, there would never have been a letter written; that I'll vouch for.'"

His father allowed this fine sentence to lie unnoticed for a second before he replied: "Thank you, George, for your flattering opinion. I believe, however, that I did write some such letter. You must remember we were not then so conscientious about such matters as we are now."

It was as much his father's easy confession of the act as the act itself which surprised George. He could never bring himself to admit having done anything foolish.

"You really wrote a letter to McCann?" he asked.

His father nodded calmly.

"Bless my soul! But can you trust McCann?"

For the first time that evening Oliver Varens smiled, a slight, painful smile. "Trust," he said. "I know that word only as a noun." He paused. "My boy," he went on, "even in '98 I had a notion that that was an imprudent letter, and two days after I wrote it I destroyed it myself in McCann's office."

"Of course, a copy may have been made."

"A hundred for all I care. Copies are no use, unless they come out of my own letter-book."

"Then you feel no anxiety?"

His father looked reflectively at the three decanters before him—one brown as liquid mahogany, one green as an emerald, one colorless as ice. He finally chose the last.

"George," he said, as he poured out a glass, "no one has successfully black-

mailed me yet. Only two have ever tried it, and one of them is in Sing Sing." At this recollection he almost smiled again. "However," he added, "it might be worth while for me to go over my letter-file and see what I did say. You can go and talk to your sister."

They rose. George looked at his watch. He wanted to get away to a sale of Chinese porcelains, in which he took a hard, businesslike interest, but he saw he had half an hour to spare and went to the drawing-room.

This room was even more reminiscent of the decorative ideas of the early '80's than the dining-room. George wondered how Lola could bear it.

She was sitting reading, with her long, slender feet stretched out on a footstool. She was tall, almost too tall for her weight; her eyes were soft and brown; her dark hair was saved from being commonplace by a uniform tinge in it of purplish red. She was supposed to resemble her dead mother, who had been a beauty. Lola, if there had been some suggestion of force in her movements, a tinge of color in her cheeks, a trace of animation in her expression, would have been a strikingly handsome woman.

George came in with his hands in his pockets and bent over a small, blue vase on a table. "Where did you get that gem?" he asked, contemptuously.

"Father bought it, I think," she said. "It's a pretty color."

"It has no value," returned her brother. "Why don't you learn something about these things. I have a man dine with me twice a week, and I tell you he teaches me a lot."

"I'm tired of learning," she answered, impatiently. "I'm always learning and never doing."

"That's better than most of us, who are always doing and never learning."

She sprang up with unusual energy and put both her hands on her brother's shoulders. She was taller than he, in her high heels. "George," she said, "I want you to do something for me. Ask father to give me an allowance of my own."

George laughed uneasily. When he invoked the lightning he preferred to do it for his own benefit.

"You'd be the loser by any such arrangement, my dear girl," he answered, "He'd never give you half, no, not one-tenth what he lets you spend as it is."

"But that's just it. He lets me spend it. I want just once to do something my own way. Why, George, I lead the life of an eight-year-old child. I don't even select my own clothes. After all, I'm his daughter; I have some brains and ability. I feel as if I must use them or die. Can't you understand that, George?"

For an instant her brother honestly tried to understand. When he thought of himself, he knew he would rather die than change places with her. But when he compared her life with other women's, it seemed to him that most of them would envy her—her luxury, her safety, her peace. Some even might envy her close association with such a czar in the financial world as Oliver Varens; but these, he reflected, would be women who had the wit or the wickedness to make something tangible out of such an association.

"I don't see much the matter with your life, Lola," he said. "You ought to see the lives some women have to lead. I don't know of anything you couldn't have as things are, if it weren't for your own lack of initiative."

Withdrawing her hands from his shoulders, she flung them in the air. "Initiative!" she cried. "And how much do you think you'd have, if you had lived as I have? Suppose you still felt strange alone in the street. Suppose you had never bought a railroad ticket for yourself. Suppose you had never been allowed to compete for anything you wanted against other people who wanted it, too? Do you think you'd have developed initiative and strength of character and all the rest of it? No, George, you'd probably be worse than I am."

He decided to give her what comfort he could. "Well," he said, "I can see it might be hard to live in the house with my father—at least it was for me, but then I think he actually disliked me, whereas he worships the ground you walk on, Lola. I don't believe he could get on without you; honestly, I don't. That must be a satisfaction to you."

"Ask him to do as I say, George."

The room was close, and far off he heard his father's approaching step. There was something oppressive in the air; for an instant George really caught a glimpse of what his sister meant.

"I'll try," he said, and knew he would regret the promise. "I'll try, but if he had ever intended to do it, he'd have done it long ago, without waiting to be pestered by either you or me. And even if he does, I don't know what good it will do you. If you had had the courage and energy and push to get it for yourself, that would have helped; but to have it handed to you because I ask for it for you doesn't seem any great triumph of independence. But I'll ask, I'll ask, if you insist."

She nodded her head briskly. "I do insist," she said, just as her father entered.

In spite of his ancestry, which was largely Scotch and North-of-Ireland, Mr. Varens looked at times almost Chinese in his imperturbability. He looked so now.

He approached his daughter and laid his hand lightly and fondly on her shoulder. "Lola," he said, in his low, even voice, "you understand my filing-system better than I do myself. Go and see if you can put your hand on a letter of mine to McCann about the Western Co., in November, 1898."

When she had gone, he turned to his son. "She would make an excellent secretary, so obedient, so intelligent. I sometimes wish I had had her taught stenography."

"Why didn't you?"

"In my opinion, a profession makes a woman too independent for her own good."

The opportunity seemed too fortunate to let pass, and George took advantage of it. "Lola has just been speaking to me about herself. She doesn't seem content."

His father, who had sat down and crossed his hands and feet, an attitude which had become habitual with him, pulled once at his long cigar before he answered, "Did you ever know a woman who was?"

Try as he would, George could not resist the wish this tone always created

in him to join forces with his father, to be one of a pair of Olympians talking over the affairs of an inferior species. He was not a subtle man, not given to splitting hairs ethically; but he was shrewd enough to know that to smile responsively into his father's impassive face would be to betray his sister's cause at the outset. Yet not for the life of him could he have helped so smiling, as he answered:

"Just at present her idea seems to be that a fixed allowance would solve all her problems." More and more clearly as he spoke he saw it was wise to disassociate himself as much as possible from this vicarious petition. "I told her how short-sighted she was, how much more she could count on, as things are now; but you know what a woman is when she gets an idea into her head." From his manner it might have been supposed that he had acted throughout as his father's viceroy.

The elder man smoked on in silence.

"What shall I tell her, sir?"

"Nothing."

"I should like to report something, just to show her that I've done as she asked me."

At first it seemed as if Mr. Varens would remain unmoved by this appeal to speak, but, in the pause, the door opened and his daughter entered. She made little noise, and the door was behind him, but he was aware of her presence, and, taking his cigar out of his mouth, he said, clearly:

"You may tell her that any expenditures that I approve of her making, I will finance."

"I see. And those you don't approve of—"

"I should not allow her to make in any event."

George, with senses less acute than his father, had not noticed the entrance of his sister, and therefore he took no trouble to conceal his pleasure that the tiresome little incident was definitely closed. "Yes, yes, I see," he said, cheerfully. "Well, I must say that seems perfectly fair."

"Always glad to have your approval, George," murmured his father.

At this Lola came forward. "It's delightful to find you two so well agreed,"

she said, and her voice actually trembled with the bitterness of her resentment. George stared at her with his round, prominent eyes. Amazement was always his preliminary state of mind whenever any one showed disapproval of his conduct. Afterward he was wont to explain the phenomenon as due to peculiarities in the other person's psychology.

Her father seemed not to notice her excitement. "Did you find the letter, my dear?" he asked, holding out his hand to her.

She shook her head. "No; but I saw the place where it must have been. It's been taken out."

George glanced quickly at the older man. "That's what they have, then."

Varens nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"This letter," said Lola—"was it important?"

She had spoken to her father, but George answered. "Very important, very important indeed," he said. He felt himself excited, and somehow the excitement was not wholly painful. He was prepared to help his father to the uttermost, to stand by him, to work for him, bribe for him if necessary; even—his mind went forward to the uttermost disaster—to go on the stand and perjure himself and go to prison for him; but all the time there would be a certain satisfaction in knowing that the old man had tripped up at last. Aloud he said, rather grandly:

"Oh, well, you know, McCann can be bought."

His father just glanced at him—no more.

"Bought," George went on, "but it must all be made to look pretty. You might have to go as high as fifty thousand dollars invested in some of his wild schemes."

"I might consent even to go on one of his boards," said Varens.

The two men talked long. For some time Lola was a silent auditor, but they did not apparently notice her presence, nor, when she slipped away, did they observe her going. George's porcelain sale had long been over when at last he got up to go. His father went into the hall with him, where a servant was waiting with his hat and coat.

"Miss Varens gone up-stairs?" he asked, carelessly.

"No, sir; Miss Varens went out, just this minute."

"Went out?" exclaimed George.

"Just now, sir."

"What in the world does that mean?" George demanded, turning to his father.

"Nothing," said Varens. "It's not so." But even as he spoke there was a ring at the bell, and the servant, springing to answer it, admitted Lola, bare-headed, wrapped in a dark cloak.

Her father eyed her; her brother asked, loudly, "Where in Heaven's name have you been?"

She handed her cloak to the servant with a gesture almost defiant as she replied, "Just to post a letter."

Her father was still watching her. "Oh," he said, "we post our own letters nowadays, do we? This is feminism with a vengeance."

George at once caught the note. It was to be mockery, not war.

"*Allons, enfants de la patrie*," he said, and, jamming his hat on his head, he went off whistling the "Marseillaise."

The door shut behind him; the servant began moving about putting things to rights, in obedience to Mr. Varens's order that the house was to be closed; but even in giving these orders he continued to watch his daughter.

"Father," she said, suddenly, "I want to speak to you."

"Not to-night, my dear. I have important matters to consider to-night."

"What I have to say is important, too."

"I fancy to-morrow will do as well. Good night, my dear." He kissed her tenderly. "And, hereafter, let the servants post your letters." With this he turned toward his study, and she, after an instant of hesitation, went slowly up-stairs, as if against her own volition.

All of Varens's real work had been done sitting motionless and in silence alone at his desk. Other men took notes, wrote letters, thought things out as they went about their daily routine; but Varens's custom was simply to sit looking straight ahead of him.

"I must familiarize myself with the situation," was a phrase of his, and by it

he meant that he must sit thus alone until his grasp of facts was complete. Then action followed automatically.

He had gone to his study, and was still sitting there at one o'clock that same night. His study was a small room built over the yard. Small as it was, it was bare and almost empty. There were two filing cabinets, a few chairs, and in the center a little table, holding nothing but a telephone. Assuredly Varens's equipment was in his own head.

This room was connected with the rest of the house by only a narrow passage, and along this Varens suddenly became aware that steps were approaching. He listened intently, and his eyes turned to the drawer of the little table, in which he kept a revolver. When the door-handle turned his own hand moved toward the drawer, but when he saw that the newcomer was only Lola, he sat back once more and folded his hands.

"Can't be interrupted to-night, Lola," he said.

Without raising his voice, he had used a certain crispness of enunciation that usually served to vanquish her, but when, looking up, he saw that she was not even flurried by his tone, he recognized immediately that there must be something unusual in the situation. Lola's own aspect was unusual. Her color was high, her eyes shining. She looked more lovely than he had ever seen her; but it was not this that so surprised him. It was an air at once stern and careless, a sort of hard brightness about her that he had never seen before.

"Has anything happened, Lola?" he asked.

"Yes — no, nothing has happened, except that I must speak to you, father."

"I have already told you twice that I am occupied."

"I can tell you, though, that you are wasting your time. You're thinking how you can get back your letter. Well, I have it."

"Oh, you've found it." He smiled at her kindly, a very different smile from that to which he treated his son. "Good! That saves me some anxiety."

"Some anxiety and fifty thousand dollars."

"Possibly fifty thousand, but that is less important."

"Father, give me that money. It's the only thing I have ever asked you for. You've never given me anything."

"Never given you anything, Lola?" he said. "What do you mean! What have you in the world that I have not given you?"

"I have nothing," she answered. "You've never been willing to give me either the money or the education to get anything for myself. That's just what I mean."

Varens had not the faintest idea what she meant. In a business relation he never would have committed himself to words until he saw the situation a little more clearly, but in a domestic relation it had never occurred to him that such caution could be necessary.

"You must express yourself a little more calmly, Lola, before I can understand you," he said. "Are you complaining of the way I have brought you up and educated you?"

"Look at the result."

"The result, my dear, seems to me a very charming woman."

"Charming!" she cried, with real ferocity. "And for whom has my charm been preserved? I never see a man except you. What good has my charm ever done me? The only time any one ever felt it, the only time a man ever did have the courage to penetrate into this house when you weren't here—"

Her father held up his hand to stop her. "One minute," he said. "I have, as it happens, kept track of that young man, not so very young any more, by the way. He is at present assistant traffic manager of a small Southern railroad, earning a salary of thirty-five hundred dollars, and his habits are not temperate. Do you think that would have made you happy?"

"At least I should have lived. I'd have had my own life, my own children—"

"Life! Children!" exclaimed Varens. "I don't like to hear you talk like that. Lola, my daughter! Is this the point of this whole absurd scene—to reproach me with not having allowed you to marry that commonplace drunkard?"

"No," answered Lola, firmly; "no, that's not what I reproach you with. I was never really sure I wanted to marry him, even at the time. But I do reproach you with having brought me up to be so timid, so dependent, so ignorant, that if I *had* wanted to marry a poor man, or to do anything else that required courage and self-reliance, it would have been impossible. That's what has been tyrannical, father. That's where I never had a chance."

"I have always believed," he answered, "that for a small number of women marriage was not necessary. I had supposed you were one of these. Perhaps I have paid you too high a compliment."

"It's not marriage only. It's everything. You wouldn't let me go to college. You wouldn't let me go to the Pacific with Miss Comans, hunting shells. You wouldn't let me do any settlement work. You would not even let me go to school."

"At home you had the undivided attention of the best teachers."

"But do you suppose they did not find out quickly enough that you didn't care whether I learned anything or not? They soon saw that you would take me off to Florida or Italy in the middle of my winter's work, if it suited your pleasure. There were no examinations, no competition, no tests, no inquiry. One of those Frenchwomen and I used to do nothing but read novels together, and such novels! If I had been a boy—if it had been a question of George, you would have wanted to be sure that you were getting your money's worth—that he was really working. It would have been thought bad for his character to be idle, and he would have been offered incentives to work. I was always offered incentives not to work."

Her father laughed. "I think, my dear," he said, "we may safely leave the rest of this indictment till the morning."

"Father, will you give me that money?"

"I will not."

"You would have given it to that blackmailer."

"Only if there had been no other way."

She struck her hand on the table.

"Well, there is no other way," she said. "I have your letter, and I will only give it back for fifty thousand dollars!"

There was a pause of several seconds, during which, as Varens intended, the dramatic quality of her last words a good deal evaporated.

Then he said, pleasantly: "Sometime you must get me to tell you how blackmailing is really done. The attempt and not the deed is particularly disastrous. For instance, what could be more childish than for you, physically weaker than I am, and unarmed, to come to me alone at this hour and tell me you have on your person a paper that I am willing to give a large sum of money to obtain?"

"It is not on my person."

"In your room is about the same thing. I have only to lock you in here and make a thorough search of the house. Nothing could be easier than that, you know."

"It is not in the house."

Now, for the first time perhaps in all her life, she had his full, concentrated attention.

"Where is it?"

"It was that I went out to post."

"You mean it's already out of your hands?"

"No." She explained carefully. "It is in an envelope directed to the editor of a newspaper, and I inclosed it to a friend of mine with instructions to hold it until half-past ten to-morrow morning, and then to mail it unless I telephoned to the contrary."

"Why did you name half-past ten?"

"To give you time to get to the bank."

Something seemed to vibrate in the air as Oliver Varens began to think. "This is not your own scheme," he said, bending on her the full intensity of his gaze. "Some one has suggested this?"

She nodded.

"Who? George?"

"You yourself, father. Isn't it just what you did in the Crawford case? Remember, you've always told me about your successes."

It was true. His memory went back to a hundred indiscretions, too far from mutual to be called confidences. He had sometimes felt the need of recounting his triumphs, and only to his daughter had he felt safe in doing so.

"I have trusted you too much, Lola," he said, forgetting that earlier in the evening he had disclaimed any knowledge of such a verb.

"No, father, you have despised me too much."

Presently he said: "Suppose for the sake of argument I should write you a check for this money, would that content you? Would you then give me the letter and end this matter at once?"

She shook her head. "That was just what Crawford tried to do. You explained to me yourself how he could have stopped payment on the check as soon as the documents were in his hands."

"What is your programme, then?"

"That you meet me at the bank at ten to-morrow morning with the money in cash."

"Let us talk business," he said, as if everything that went before had been mere folly. "Suppose that you should actually put this through, our relations would be severed for ever. You, who seem to have followed my career more closely than I had imagined, will believe me when I say that I do not readily forgive. If you do this, you will never get anything more from me, during my life or after my death. You cannot possibly live on the income from fifty thousand dollars; even the principal would not last very long as you have been accustomed to live. What then? You would starve."

"I'm starving now."

For the first time Varens showed signs of anger. "What damned nonsense!" he said. "Starving! Eating three meals a day cooked by a French cook, enjoying every luxury, and why? Only because you are my daughter. If you're not my daughter you're nothing, nothing, nothing."

"Perhaps," she said, "but I want to know what I am—even that." She stood up. "At ten to-morrow."

He held out his hand. "One moment, Lola."

A silence fell. He knew he had one more card to play; he might still make an appeal to her affection. If he could do that, she would yield; but could he do it? From the moment that she rebelled against him something very like

hatred for her had stirred within him, making such an appeal difficult. But in the silence he bent his own stiff nature.

"Lola," he said, "since your mother's death you have been the only creature in the world whom I have loved, and I have loved you deeply."

Watching her, he saw a muscle in her throat twitch, then her whole chin trembled, then she burst into tears. "Oh, father," she said, "I am so sorry, so very sorry."

Beneath his triumph he was almost sorry himself to see the quick collapse of so formidable a fabric. He sprang up, and, coming round the table, he put his arm about her. "It's all over, my dear," he said; "we will never speak or think of it again."

She wept silently for a second or two more before she could speak. Then she said: "Oh, father, don't be silly. I

mean I'm so sorry to hurt you like this, but I intend to do just what I said." And at this she sobbed aloud.

He stepped back from her, and she went to the door.

"Good night, father," she said.

"Good night," he answered mechanically.

He was still sitting at his desk when the housemaid came in with her dustpan and broom. She gave a little scream and hurried away, for the orders were strict that Mr. Varens was never to be disturbed in his study.

But she need not have gone, for Varens' work was done. The night had been long, but not unfruitful; he had familiarized himself with the situation, had analyzed it and summed it up.

"The trouble was," he said as he rose, "that I ought always to have borne in mind that she is after all my daughter."